Who dat say Louisiana students got no vocabulary?

According to a newspaper story published last week, Louisiana continues to bring up the rear in public school education, despite a push to improve things. The story reported that college test scores of students in this state have decreased over the past decade and there are more dropouts.

How low can we go? As that insightful philosopher Murphy once said, “Things are never so bad that they can’t get worse.”

The reaction from people that I talked to about this ranged from horror to, “Well, what do you expect? This is Louisiana.”

My reaction was that this is about the 2000th story I have heard about how lousy education is in Louisiana. I don’t follow the situation that closely, but I don’t believe education in this state will ever be worth a damn until we make it a priority over other endeavors, such as building Superdomes.

In my opinion, another reason that Louisiana, and particularly New Orleans, students don’t fare well on national tests is that natives of this area don’t know day-to-day vocabulary. We don’t even speak the same language they do in the rest of the country. We don’t know what words mean.

How could we possibly score well on a test in which normal correct English is used?

Pass over by (as in, “I’m gonna pass over by my gramma’s house”) is not a synonym for “go to.” A pass is what you make at a girl, or what the quarterback throws to a receiver on a football field. Some people pass out. Passover is a Jewish holiday. A byte is something related to tennis or golf tournaments that means you don’t have to play until the next match.

- Caw is not what you always have to put in the shop, costs a lot of money to operate, and breaks down when you need it the most. Caw is what crows say: “Caw! Caw!”
- Myinez. Whatever myinez is, it is not what the rest of the nation puts on ham sammiches. It is not a salad dressing made from eggs. What it is, is a strange combination of two words: my, which is a possessive adjective, as in “my mistake”; and Inez, a girl’s name, and a barmaid I once knew.
- Make, as in “make groceries.” People in Nebraska would not interpret this as meaning going to the supermarket to purchase food. You don’t make groceries, you make out; if you’re lucky, you make love, not war; you make mistakes, you make it or break it.
- Swagman. Occurs more frequently in the possessive form — Swagman’s — as in, “Ya tried one uh dem fawty-two cents Swagman beers at da store?” This would absolutely stun Australians — where the term is popular — and possibly the rest of the English-speaking world who have come to know the term “swagman” as a vagabond.

Now if we can just work to eliminate these common terms from our vocabulary, and employ the proper usage, test scores will soon be on the road to respectability. Trust me. Someday, someone will look back on my erudite thoughts about education and say, “Who dat say dat ’bout dem test scores?”

If you don’t know what I’m talking about, here are a few examples:

Contrary to popular local opinion and dialect:
- Erm is not what you put in your crankcase, or on the squeaky springs under your bed. It is the name of a rather flamboyant former governor of Louisiana and the title of assorted British royalty.
- Mudder is not the name of the woman who changed your diapers, gave you an enema when your stomach hurt, and threw your old man out of the house when he came home looped on Friday. It is racing lingo for a thoroughbred racehorse who runs well on a sloppy or muddy track.
- Fodder is not the name of the man who came home looped every Friday evening, had to listen to a lot of guff from his old lady and then got thrown out of the house anyway. Fodder, outside of the Ninth Ward, is more commonly known as food for horses, mules, cattle, etc., or something that is used to supply a constant demand.
- Zinc is not what you pile the dirty dishes in and hope somebody else washes them. It is one of the more than 100 elements that is a nutrient for both plants and animals, and is also used as a protective coating for iron and steel.
- Foist is not a street that crosses St. Charles Avenue and runs through the Garden District. Nor is it an elementary grade between kindergarten and second. According to Webster, foist is a verb that means to force another to accept something, especially by stealth or deceit.